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The Boer War (1899–1902) and British Cavalry Doctrine: A Re-Evaluation



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Abstract

Among the important British Army reforms following the Boer War (1899–1902) was the introduction of a longer-range rifle for the cavalry instead of a carbine, and a tactical doctrine including dismounted fire. It remains the view of most historians that the cavalry learned dismounted tactics from their Boer opponents, and that postwar reform of the cavalry was imposed from outside. Senior cavalry officers of the period are viewed as reactionary, and their performance in the First World War judged accordingly. This view is based on a partisan interpretation of the Boer War and the cavalry's role in it, fostered by its contemporary institutional critics. In fact, a cavalry reform movement was introducing dismounted tactics before the Boer War, both sides in the war used mounted and dismounted tactics, and the cavalry's problems were largely those of supply and not of their own making. This has much wider implications for the assessment of British military doctrines up to the end of the First World War.

WRITING at the end of the South African Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902 (to give its present official title),¹ Colonel G. F. R. Henderson, lately Professor of Military History at the British Army Staff Col-

1. This paper owes its origins to the author's unpublished Ph.D. thesis: S. D. Badsey, "Fire and the Sword: the British Army and the *Arme Blanche* Controversy, 1871–1921" (Cambridge University, 1981). An earlier version was published as "Mounted Combat in the Second Boer War," *Sandhurst Journal of Military Studies*

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lege at Camberley, noted that the future weapons and tactics of horsed cavalry were “from a military point of view one of the most interesting and momentous questions of the day.”² In a wider military history context, the main impact of the Boer War was that it fostered a number of British military reforms made before the First World War of 1914–18. Of these, one was that by 1908, alone among the major powers of Europe, the British Empire had the only cavalry entirely armed with an infantry rifle rather than a shorter carbine, together with a tactical doctrine based on dismounted firepower and on synchronising a mounted charge with flanking or supporting fire, giving the British a marked advantage over their enemies. Several contemporaries expressed the view that these reforms were imposed on a reluctant and reactionary cavalry arm, first by the superior tactics of their Boer enemies, and then by outside reformers led by Lord Roberts as the last holder of the post of Commander-in-Chief of the British Army, 1901–4. The strongest attack against both the cavalry as an institution and its retention of the mounted charge as a tactic, made with Lord Roberts’s full backing, was Erskine Childers’s polemical book *War and the Arme Blanche* in 1910. Other prominent Boer War veterans critical of the cavalry included Winston S. Churchill, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Leopold S. Amery, editor of the multivolume *Times History* of the war.³ Colonel C. E. Callwell, in his highly

2 (1991): 10–27, a journal so obscure that it had no third volume and a tiny circulation. This revised and slightly shortened version incorporates further research, corrects a few minor errors, and acknowledges the publication of new evidence, particularly as a result of the war’s hundredth anniversary commemorations in South Africa. Acknowledgements are due to the British Library in London [BL], Cambridge University Library [CUL], Hove Public Library [HPL], the Trustees of the Imperial War Museum in London [IWM], the Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives at King’s College London [LHCMA], the National Army Museum in London [NAM], the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh [NLS], and the United Kingdom National Archives (Public Record Office) in Kew [TNA]. For recent general histories of the war, see Bill Nasson, *The South African War, 1899–1902* (London: Arnold, 1999); and Denis Judd and Keith Surridge, *The Boer War* (London: John Murray, 2002). For individual battles and campaigns, military organisation, and wartime experience, see Darrall Hall, *The Hall Handbook of the Anglo-Boer War* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1999); Anthony Baker, *Battles and Battlefields of the Anglo-Boer War, 1899–1902* (London: Military Press, 1999); Fransjohan Pretorius, *Life on Commando During the Anglo-Boer War, 1899–1902* (Cape Town: Human and Rousseau, 1999); John Gooch, ed., *The Boer War: Direction, Experience and Image* (London: Frank Cass, 2000). For British mounted forces, see The Marquess of Anglesey, *A History of the British Cavalry, 1816–1919*, vol. 4, 1899–1913 (London: Leo Cooper, 1986).

2. G. F. R. Henderson, *The Science of War* (London: Longmans Green, 1905), 51; this was a posthumous collected work, Henderson dying in 1903.

3. Erskine Childers, *War and the Arme Blanche* (London: Edward Arnold, 1910); see also the collection of documents by Childers in the Roberts Papers, NAM; and Ian Hamilton to Erskine Childers, 30 October 1910, Hamilton Papers, LHCMA; Winston S. Churchill, “Impressions of the War in South Africa,” *Journal of the Royal*

influential work *Small Wars*, summarised the case against the cavalry in maintaining that the Boers “were mounted rifles who fought dismounted, and the result of months of warfare in which some of the finest cavalry in the world was pitted against them, was that they, irregulars as they were, and to all extents and purposes untrained in the art of war, compelled the cavalry to transform itself into mounted rifles.”⁴

This interpretation of mounted combat in the Boer War endured through the first half of the twentieth century, largely because association with a reactionary cavalry doctrine became a way of attacking senior British officers of the First World War such as Field Marshal Sir John French and Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig as “Cavalry Generals.” According to Basil Liddell Hart, writing in 1930, the “most remarkable feature” of the 1902 Elgin Commission, the official British investigation on their conduct of the Boer War, “was the way that French and Haig dis-coursed on the paramount value of the *arme blanche* [steel weapon—cavalry sword and lance], implying that so long as the cavalry charge was maintained all would be well with the conduct of war.”⁵ As well as failing to reflect the testimony of either French or Haig accurately, Liddell Hart’s claim also failed to acknowledge the highly politicised nature of evidence given by senior officers to the Elgin Commission on the cavalry issue, due to a much wider disagreement between Roberts and his critics on his own conduct of the war as Commander-in-Chief in South Africa, 1900–1901. By the second half of the twentieth century it had become so well established as to be taken for granted that belief in the cavalry as an institution equated to belief in the mounted charge, and that both reflected a reactionary mindset. But over time, some British historians became, if not apologists for the cavalry, then at least apologetic, pointing out the unfairness of the broad “Cavalry General” condemnation, or that the cavalry had not been a complete failure.⁶ Quite recently a few historians have gone further, suggesting that the interpretation of mounted combat in the Boer War that has been handed down

United Services Institute [JRUSI] 45 (1901): 835–48; Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Great Boer War* (London: Smith, Elder, 1900), 518–19; L. S. Amery, ed., *The Times History of the War in South Africa*, vol. 3 (London: Sampson Low, 1902), 413, 568.

4. C. E. Callwell, *Small Wars: A Tactical Textbook for Imperial Soldiers* (London: Stationery Office [1896] 1906 ed.; repr., London: Greenhill, and Novato, Calif.: Presidio, 1990), 412–13.

5. Basil H. Liddell Hart, *Liddell Hart’s History of the First World War* (London: Pan, 1972), 35. Originally published in 1930 as *The Real War, 1914–1918*.

6. See, e.g., John Terraine, *Douglas Haig: The Educated Soldier* (London: Leo Cooper, 1963), 21; Shelford Bidwell and Dominick Graham, *Fire-Power: British Army Weapons and Theories of War, 1904–1945* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1982), 32–34.

to us may be wrong.⁷ Others reject this new interpretation completely, describing changes in cavalry doctrine made under Sir John French after Lord Roberts's retirement in 1904 as "A Cavalry Counter-Reformation."⁸ Most historians dealing with wider British military issues from 1902 to 1918 continue to take for granted that support for the cavalry and the mounted charge by French and Haig was evidence of their failure to realise the changing nature of warfare. By contrast, senior officers who fought in the Boer War, including Lord Roberts, Lord Methuen, and Sir Ian Hamilton, are evaluated as "modern" or "progressive" by the extent to which they opposed the cavalry's institutional existence.⁹

This argument has also gained an Imperial facet, with the assertion by some Australian historians that their own horsemen in the Boer War were mounted riflemen trained for dismounted fighting and not the charge, and were therefore more tactically progressive than their British counterparts. Since British horsemen who were not trained for the charge, including the Mounted Infantry (formed from the line infantry battalions of the Army) and the early contingents of the volunteer Imperial Yeomanry, generally performed badly in the Boer War, this argument has also been used to reinforce the suggestion of an inherent superiority of colonial soldiers over their British counterparts. A recent Canadian study has also argued that for the Boer War, the authorities hoped to recruit backwoodsmen rather than town-dwellers for the Canadian Mounted Rifles, a force which they saw as modelled on Theodore Roosevelt's famous Rough Riders of the Spanish-American War of 1898.¹⁰

7. Anglesey, *A History of the British Cavalry*, 4:338–423; Gervase Phillips, "The Obsolescence of the Arme Blanche and Technological Determinism in British Military History," *War in History* 9 (January 2002): 39–59; Stephen Badsey, "Bullets versus Horses? Douglas Haig, the Boer War and the Development of Rifle-armed Cavalry, 1880–1914," *Osprey Military Journal* 3, no. 2 ([2001]): 41–49.

8. This is the title of a chapter in Gerard J. de Groot, *Douglas Haig, 1861–1928* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), 94–112.

9. Tim Travers, *The Killing Ground: The British Army, the Western Front, and the Emergence of Modern Warfare, 1900–1918* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1982), 203–17; John Gooch, *The Plans of War: The General Staff and British Military Strategy, c.1900–1916* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), 117; Jay Stone and Erwin A. Schmidl, *The Boer War and Military Reforms* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1988), 108–111; Stephen M. Miller, *Lord Methuen and the British Army: Failure and Redemption in South Africa* (London: Frank Cass, 1999), 240–42, 252–53; John Lee, *A Soldier's Life: General Sir Ian Hamilton, 1853–1947* (London: Macmillan, 2000), 21.

10. See the contrasting views of three Australian historians, all in Peter Dennis and Jeffrey Grey, eds., *The Boer War: Army, Nation and Empire* (Canberra: Army History Unit, 2000): Craig Wilcox, "Looking Back on the South African War," 8–11; Jean Bou, "Modern Cavalry: Mounted Rifles, the Boer War, and the Doctrinal Debates," 99–114; and Iain G. Spence, "'To Shoot and to Ride': Mobility and Fire-

As Colonel Callwell acknowledged in *Small Wars*, the two Boer republics and their armed forces possessed unique features which prevented their fitting his definition of colonial or irregular warfare.¹¹ The armed forces of the South African Republic (usually known by its older title of the Transvaal) and Orange Free State, created by the Afrikaner descendants of European colonists, included a few professional corps such as the artillery, and some overseas volunteers or mercenaries, but were largely composed of locally raised units (the word “Boer” means farmer) between company and battalion size, known as Commandos and acting as mounted riflemen. The Boers “on commando” were legally obliged to serve, elected their lower-ranking officers, and had their supplies and transport provided at first by their extended families, including Africans known as *agterryers* (“after-riders”). Against these Commando forces, numbering perhaps 65,000 at the war’s start, the British Army pitted eventually 256,000 regular soldiers supplemented by 210,000 volunteers. For about a year after its declaration in October 1899, the war was characterised by a series of conventional set-piece battles, including the notorious triple defeat of three widely separated British forces under the overall command of General Sir Redvers Buller in “Black Week” of December 1899, followed by the rapid and successful British advance under Lord Roberts to capture the state capitals of Bloemfontein and Pretoria by June 1900, and the subsequent annexation of the two republics. This period of conventional warfare was then followed by a protracted guerrilla war against British forces under Lord Kitchener until the final Boer surrender in May 1902.

Many British cavalry officers of 1899 fitted the stereotype of wealthy men who affected professional ignorance as part of an accepted social code, and were content to treat their regiments as an episode comparable to an agreeable club prior to embarking on a later civilian career. It has been rightly pointed out that for such officers and their regiments, “the charge” was less a tactic than an entire philosophy of life.¹² But in the two decades before the Boer War a growing reform movement within the cavalry had made considerable progress in changing cavalry tactics in the face of increasing firepower from artillery and magazine rifles.¹³ In

power in Mounted Warfare,” 115–28. See also Carman Miller, *Painting the Map Red: Canada and the South African War, 1899–1902* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1993), 156.

11. Callwell, *Small Wars*, 31, 412–13.

12. Brian Bond, “Doctrine and Training in the British Cavalry, 1870–1914,” in *The Theory and Practice of War: Essays Presented to Captain B. H. Liddell Hart on His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Michael Howard (London: Cassell, 1965), 99.

13. See, among many examples: “Report of the Committee on Musketry Instruction in the Army 1881,” WO 33/37 A 849, and “Report of the Cavalry Organisation Committee, 1882,” WO 33/38 A 865, TNA; F. Chevenix-Trench, *Cavalry in Modern War* (London: n.p., 1884); John French, “Cavalry Manoeuvres,” *JRUSI* 39 (1895): 561–65.

the cavalry (including the Household Cavalry) as in the Guards, the Royal Horse Artillery, and what were known as the infantry's "class corps" such as the Rifle regiments, the exclusivity based on privilege provided a rapid turnover in officers, and gave the greatest opportunity to those who were both serious and professional to reach high rank quickly. It is not a coincidence that virtually all the British higher commanders of the First World War came from these socially exclusive regiments, having risen rapidly on the tide of growing professionalism in the British Army during the 1880s.¹⁴

The main impetus for this cavalry reform movement came, unsurprisingly, from the British colonial war experience, in which the massed mounted charge proved of little value against dispersed or extended bands of foot warriors. Experiments with horse artillery and machine-guns led instead to a doctrine of fire support, enveloping tactics, reserves, and flank attacks of considerable sophistication. Although not given its first official written expression until the new *Cavalry Drill* manual in 1896, authored by Colonel John French with Major Douglas Haig's assistance,¹⁵ this doctrine had been developed and transmitted verbally long before that date, and was endorsed by virtually all experienced senior British commanders, including Lord Wolseley as Commander-in-Chief (1895–1900), Lord Roberts, Sir Evelyn Wood, and Sir Redvers Buller. Unsurprisingly also, the main agent of reform was the Inspector General of Cavalry in the early 1890s, Sir James Keith Fraser, who advanced the careers of both French and Haig. As well as providing the cavalry with a wider range of tactics, the reformers emphasised the cavalry's scouting function, and uniforms and equipment more suitable for warfare than for the parade-ground. The massed charge of horse against horse, although it retained its central place as the ultimate expression of the cavalry's status, was recognised as a very rare event indeed.

Unfortunately, in their approach to the problem of firepower, the British Army cavalry reformers of the later nineteenth century and their critics spoke almost in different languages. Stretching back at least to the 1850s, a "firepower" school within the infantry and artillery took the maximum range of each new weapon, combined with the maximum rate of fire and the average score at target practice, to produce a paper calculation of the weapon's effect, and then used this to prove that any cavalry charge

14. John Terraine, *The Smoke and the Fire: Myths and Anti-Myths of War, 1861–1945* (London: Leo Cooper, 1992), 161–69; Stephen Badsey, "Cavalry and the Development of Breakthrough Doctrine," in *British Fighting Methods in the Great War*, ed. Paddy Griffith (London: Frank Cass, 1996), 138–74.

15. Richard Holmes, *The Little Field Marshal, Sir John French* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1981), 51; Alfred Duff Cooper, *Haig*, vol. 1 (London: Faber and Faber, 1935), 39–46.

would be wiped out several times over before contact was made.¹⁶ This line of argument reached its logical conclusion in 1885 with Captain Ian Hamilton's published prediction that cavalry and direct-fire artillery would soon become obsolete, and that battles would consist entirely of widely dispersed rifle-armed infantry skirmishers picking each other off at ranges of up to one mile.¹⁷ Although claimed, in the spirit of the times, as "scientific," the calculations accompanying such arguments were crude in the extreme. Battlefield experience showed that the practical upper range of *aimed* rifle fire was no more than 500 yards, that in actual combat troops fired considerably less quickly and accurately than under controlled conditions, and that a cavalry charge was a much harder target than had been predicted.¹⁸ The experience of wars in Europe between 1859 and 1871 also did much to discredit the number-counting approach to combat analysis. In the Austro-Prussian War of 1866, the breaking of Italian squares by Austrian cavalry at the Battle of Custoza, and the check delivered to the victorious Prussian pursuit at the end of the Battle of Königgrätz by massed Austrian cavalry, were in startling contrast to earlier theories. Even the famed Prussian Dreyse "needle gun" breechloader in practice fired only three shots to two from a muzzleloader.¹⁹ In the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71, the conduct of cavalry on both sides was generally disappointing, although the Prussians achieved some remarkable if controversial cavalry victories, notably at the Battle of Mars-la-Tour; and there was a strong feeling that pessimism over the expected vulnerability of cavalry had led to timidity from its commanders.²⁰ As a result, a school of British military thought started to reject number-counting in favour of the study of previous combats. "If we would learn not what men can do, and what they cannot do," argued Colonel Henderson, then unproven theory was not enough and "we must turn to history."²¹ It was characteristic

16. See, for example, from the 1860s: Anon., "The Future of Cavalry," *United Service Magazine [USM]*, 1861, pt. 2: 569–75; Anon., "The Dragoon, His Horse, and their Training," *USM*, 1864, pt. 3: 329–42; Anon., "The Newly Proposed Service Arm, or the Martini Henry Rifle," *USM*, 1869, pt. 2: 106.

17. Ian Hamilton, *The Fighting of the Future* (London: Kegan Paul, 1885), 17–22.

18. V. D. Majendie, "Military Breechloading Smallarms," *JRUSI* 11 (1868): 205; H. M. Hozier, *Seven Weeks' War*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1867), 1: 226; Jean Roecker, *Cavalry: Its History, Management, and Uses in War* (New York: Van Nostrand, 1863), 120–29; Michael W. Smith, *A Treatise on Drill and Manoeuvres of Cavalry* (London: n.p., 1865), xvii.

19. Hozier, *Seven Weeks' War*, 1:221 and 1:343; Evelyn Wood, *Achievements of Cavalry* (London: George Bell, 1897), 143–91.

20. Wood, *Achievements of Cavalry*, 205–38; Philip Sheridan, *The Personal Memoirs of P. H. Sheridan: General, United States Army*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles L. Webster, 1888), 2:449; [Anon.], "The Cavalry of the Future," *USM*, 1871, pt. 1: 219.

21. G. F. R. Henderson, *The Battle of Woerth* (Camberley: Gale and Polden, 1911), Introduction (no pagination).

of the cavalry reformers, above all of Douglas Haig, that actual evidence from combat was rated far more highly than any untested hypothesis based on new technology.²²

Another major influence on the British debate over mounted troops came from the American Civil War of 1861–65. The Indian-fighting traditions of the U.S. Army and the virgin countryside in which much of the war was fought led to the development of light horsemen who often fought dismounted with a firearm, much like the European “dragoons” of the seventeenth century. This apparent anachronism was seen by the earliest British writers on the war as evidence for the primitive and inexperienced nature of the Federal and Confederate armies. The British suffered considerable difficulty in agreeing on a name for these horsemen, who usually called themselves “cavalry”; “dragoons” was misleading, since British dragoon regiments had long been heavy cavalry. They soon agreed on the term “mounted riflemen” and sometimes “mounted infantry.”²³ Unfortunately, both sides in the Civil War also occasionally put some of their infantry on horses as a means of transport only, while the Federal Army included Mounted Rifle regiments which scorned both the name and uniform of “cavalry,” although they were in all other respects identical to cavalry regiments. This confusion in terminology led British commentators to argue that “the Americans had no real cavalry,” by which they meant horsemen capable of the mounted charge.²⁴ This was quite untrue: cavalry leaders on both sides, including J. E. B. Stuart and Philip Sheridan, favoured the charge as their decisive battlefield tactic, and charges of small numbers of cavalry were not uncommon in the war.²⁵

To add to the confusion, the term “mounted infantry” changed its meaning radically within the British Army between 1860 and 1899. In their colonial wars British commanders, chronically short of cavalry for

22. Typical are Haig’s comments on the effectiveness of rifle fire at the battle of Omdurman in his diary entry for 2 September 1898, Haig Papers, NLS. See also an article that attracted favourable comment from Haig, F. N. Maude, “The Rise, Decay and Revival of the Prussian Cavalry,” *JRUSI* 38 (1894): 20–40.

23. C. C. Chesney, *A Military View of the Recent Campaigns in Virginia and Maryland*, 2 vols. (London: Smith Elder, 1863), 1:52, and 2:227; A. J. Freemantle, *Three Months in the Southern States* (London: Blackwood, 1863), 291; Garnet Wolseley, *The American Civil War: An English View*, ed. James A. Rawley (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1964).

24. C. F. Thompson, in his introduction to T. Bonie, *The French Cavalry in 1870: With Its Tactical Results* (London: Mitchell, 1873), vii.

25. Sheridan, *Personal Memoirs*, 1:337–38 and 453, 2:57–59; John Esten Cooke, *Wearing of the Gray* (Baltimore: J. S. Morrow, 1867), 33; Heros von Borke, “Memoirs of the Confederate War for Independence,” *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* 98 (1865): 281; Harry Gilmor, *Four Years in the Saddle* (New York: Harper, 1866), 145.

scouting purposes, took to mounting men from regular or colonial infantry battalions on local horses as a temporary expedient. Results were usually farcical as novice riders attempted to cope with untrained horses, but some experiments, notably Colonel Garnet Wolseley's use of mounted infantry in the Red River expedition of 1870 in Canada, were successful.²⁶ Colonel George Denison of the Governor General of Canada's Bodyguard argued in 1868 that improvised mounted infantry or riflemen could take over most of the cavalry's scouting and protection role, freeing the cavalry for the mounted charge alone.²⁷ The idea was also popular with the Treasury since, with only the extra cost of the horses to find, mounted infantry were considerably cheaper than cavalry. The mounted infantry regiment with the Suakin Field Force in 1885 cost only £12,000 a year to maintain against £28,000 for a cavalry regiment.²⁸ The chief drawback to the concept was that experienced mounted infantry soon started to turn themselves into quasi-cavalry by making mounted attacks on their enemies. In the Zulu War of 1879 some mounted riflemen even took to carrying improvised lances, or to charging mounted with fixed bayonets.²⁹

The 1886 British Army mobilisation scheme called for two army corps (with scouting horsemen attached) and a cavalry division, requiring a major increase in the size of the Army's mounted contingent. But as a result of the controversy surrounding the cavalry in the face of firearms improvements, Wolseley as Adjutant General was also under pressure from the Treasury to reduce their numbers. His solution to this dilemma was to open at Aldershot in 1888 the first of a number of Mounted Infantry (M.I.) schools, intended to train a section of thirty-three men picked from every infantry battalion in the Army.³⁰ To hold expenses to a minimum the men were given a single training period of ten weeks. As a study in 1880 had argued, the mounted infantry soldier's standard of horsemanship was meant to be no more than "To be able to keep his seat over rough ground, and not to roll about in his saddle suf-

26. E. T. H. Hutton, *Five Lectures on Mounted Infantry* (Aldershot: Gale and Polden, 1891), Lecture 4, pp. 25–66; Garnet Wolseley, *The Story of a Soldier's Life*, 2 vols. (London: Archibald Constable, 1903), 148–49.

27. G. T. Denison, *Modern Cavalry* (London: Bosworth, 1868), 73.

28. E. T. H. Hutton, "Mounted Infantry," *JRUSI* 30 (1887): 697.

29. Callwell, *Small Wars*, 414, 423.

30. See the exchange of memoranda between Wolseley and the Duke of Cambridge, W/Mem/3 Memo 1/1 January 1887, and W/Mem/3 Memo 1/n.d. January 1887, Wolseley Papers, HPL; also [J. M. Grierson], *The British Army, by a Lieutenant Colonel in the British Army* (London: Sampson Low Marston, 1899), 42–43; W. H. Goodenough and J. C. Dalton, *The Army Book for the British Empire* (London: HMSO, 1893), 172–76; W. S. Hamer, *The British Army: Civil-Military-Relations, 1885–1905* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 93–111.

ficiently to give his horse a sore back.”³¹ Wolseley’s optimistic plan was for sections from separate infantry battalions to come together on mobilisation to provide two M.I. battalions for the army corps. Henceforth in the British Army, “Mounted Infantry” were defined as members of regular line battalions with a minimum of mounted training, intended to fight on foot; and in order to protect both sorts of mounted troops from the Treasury, Wolseley maintained that they had separate and incompatible tactical roles: cavalry could not be taught to fight dismounted, nor M.I. to charge.³² This distinction was not applied to colonial forces: regiments such as the Queensland Mounted Infantry or the New Zealand Mounted Rifles were in practice fully trained cavalry, taught in the Boer War to charge with sword-bayonets, a tactic encouraged by John French.³³ Not until the *Yeomanry and Mounted Rifle Training* manual first appeared in 1912 was an official British Army definition of the term “Mounted Infantry” made, and the absence of any agreed terminology made it all too easy for debates on the respective merits of cavalry and M.I. to go in unending circles. In actual warfare any such distinction soon vanished as mounted troops adapted their tactics to the needs of the specific circumstances.

Barely had the Aldershot M.I. school been formed than its commander, and chief advocate of Mounted Infantry, Colonel Edward (“Curly”) Hutton, began to argue that rather than being solely a source of mobile firepower, the M.I. could substitute for cavalry, fulfilling all its functions except the mounted charge, on which the cavalry should concentrate entirely.³⁴ Refusing to see their arm led up this tactical blind alley, reforming cavalry officers worked to create the kind of mounted force, proficient both mounted and on foot, that the M.I. school of thought argued was impossible. An emphasis on dismounted fire was apparent in some cavalry regiments from the early 1880s. During the peace negotiations which followed the brief Transvaal War (or First Boer War, 1880–81), a reformed cavalry regiment, the 14th Hussars, organised a shooting match against its Boer opponents and consistently outshot them both at 300 and 500 yards.³⁵ By the end of the following decade the reform movement had spread throughout the cavalry and down as far as the locally raised volunteer Yeomanry cavalry, and by the Boer War it was being spoken of

31. “Memorandum on Mounted Riflemen by Lieutenant Colonel C. F. Clery, dated 1st March 1880,” in “Précis on Mounted Infantry 1881,” p. 8, WO 33/37 A855, TNA.

32. Wolseley quoted in Hutton, *Five Lectures on Mounted Infantry*, Lecture 5, pp. 23–26.

33. French, diary entry for 4 December 1899, French Papers, IWM.

34. Hutton, *Five Lectures on Mounted Infantry*, especially Lecture 4, pp. 23–26.

35. Herbert Compton, ed., *A King’s Hussar* (London: Cassell, 1893), 270; “Military Notes on the Dutch Republics of South Africa,” p. 35, WO 33/154 A596, TNA.

openly as “The Cavalry Revival.”³⁶ Douglas Haig, who would serve as chief staff officer to the Cavalry Division in South Africa, wrote in 1890 that “unless a cavalry force is by instruction and practice ready to fight on foot its usefulness will be curtailed and it cannot be considered efficient.”³⁷ In the same year, Lieutenant Colonel John French was practising squadron tactics with his regiment, the 19th Hussars, at Aldershot, and the system was extended to the whole Aldershot Cavalry Brigade in 1892. French, with Haig’s support, also advocated the use of machine-guns and artillery as a support for the cavalry. This creation of a “hybrid” cavalry proficient with both the *arme blanche* when mounted and the firearm when dismounted, rather than two separate mounted forces with different tactical doctrines, was in fact the only realistic solution, given the problems of British Army funding of the time.³⁸

Although it remains very much the accepted historical view that the British cavalry entered the Boer War, and even the First World War, “wedded to shock tactics,” by 1899 this was true only of reactionary cavalry colonels and their regiments.³⁹ Indeed, the new form of cavalry tactics, the squadron attack supported by dismounted fire, artillery, and machine-guns, had become one of the most fashionable new ideas in the British Army. Examiners for the promotion of junior officers in 1891–92 actually complained of their preference for using dismounted cavalry in tactical exercises instead of infantry.⁴⁰ Even Wolseley, once his M.I. was accepted as a necessary expenditure, was able to reverse his earlier and artificial position by 1895, when as Commander-in-Chief he told a Yeomanry regiment that “For the 12,000 Cavalry and 9,000 Yeomanry to be of real service in defending England, they must learn to shoot well and fight on foot.”⁴¹ The 1896 *Cavalry Drill* manual confirmed that in the

36. Captain E. A. Aitham, “The Cavalry Revival: A Plea for Infantry,” USM, new ser., 2 (1891): 17–34; “Report of the Committee on Musketry Instruction in the Army 1881,” WO 33/37 A849, TNA; Chenevix-Trench, *Cavalry in Modern War*, 164; R. W. Williams Wynn and Benson Freeman, *The Historical Records of the Yeomanry and Volunteers of Montgomeryshire, 1803–1908* (Oswestry: n.p., 1909), 45; C. M. G. Stoneham and Benson Freeman, *Historical Records of the Middlesex Yeomanry, 1797–1927* (London: n.p., 1930), 69.

37. Douglas Haig, “The Dismounted Action of Cavalry,” preserved in his “Cavalry Notes” and dated 15 November 1890, Haig Papers, NLS.

38. John French, “Cavalry Manoeuvres,” given from notes prepared for him by Haig as his brigade major; see also Haig’s diary entry for 17 February 1895, both in Haig Papers, NLS.

39. E. M. Spiers, “The British Cavalry, 1902–1914,” *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research [JSAHR]* 57, no. 230 (1977): 79.

40. “Reports on the Results of Examinations Held By Officers of Regular Forces, Militia and Volunteers, November 1892,” p. 7, CUL.

41. Text of a speech by Wolseley in 1895, W/W 1/14, Wolseley Papers, HPL.

enclosed countryside of industrial Great Britain and Europe, “the mounted action of cavalry will be confined to conflicts between small bodies (probably not even the strength of a squadron on either side) which may endeavour to make sudden dashes.”⁴²

In 1899 this new tactical doctrine still reflected the intentions, rather than the achievement, of the cavalry reform movement, since reform of the cavalry was heavily dependent on the attitude of individual regimental colonels. Early in the Boer War, the presence of the unreformed 9th Lancers as the only cavalry regiment with Lord Methuen’s column at the start of his advance towards Kimberley in October 1899, instead of a reformed regiment, greatly reduced the effectiveness of his mounted forces. The well-known charge of the 21st Lancers against the Sudanese at Omdurman in 1898 showed that the old ideas still persisted, although even this charge was followed up with dismounted carbine fire. Haig, who was an eyewitness to the charge, dismissed it as an attempt by the junior cavalry regiment in the British Army to increase its own prestige and social status.⁴³ Nevertheless the new doctrine of using both mounted and dismounted action as appropriate can be seen clearly among the first engagements of the Boer War, including the battles of Elandslaagte on 21 October 1899 and Lombard’s Kop nine days later. The British cavalry did not copy dismounted action from their Boer opponents, although the particular circumstances of the war forced them to rely on it to a greater extent than many had expected.

Most of the fighting in the Boer War took place on high veldt of the Orange Free State and the Transvaal, a vast exposed grass plateau 3,000 to 7,000 feet above sea level, with as its only landmarks isolated Boer farms and African kraals, and prominent flat-topped hills strewn with boulders known evocatively in Afrikaans as “kop” or “kopje,” meaning “head.” The Boers who made up the Commandos included expert animal trackers and herders. But they were not used to the stress of battle, and as British military intelligence had correctly predicted before the war, many were not at first particularly good shots on a battlefield, although often excellent hunters. An investigation by the Transvaal government after the Jameson Raid of 1896 revealed that only 59 percent of those liable for Commando service even owned rifles, and many of those who did had antiquated pieces. The shock of the Jameson Raid caused the rapid and considerable rearment of the Transvaal and Orange Free State forces with more modern weapons, particularly the 1896 7mm Mauser magazine-loading rifle; even so, the British found a high proportion of obsolescent firearms with the Boers who surrendered at Paarde-

42. *Cavalry Drill 1896*, 2 vols. (London: War Office, 1896), 2:205.

43. Douglas Haig to Evelyn Wood, 7 September 1898, Haig Papers, NLS; Edward M. Spiers, ed., *Sudan: The Reconquest Reappraised* (London: Frank Cass, 1998).

berg Drift on 27 February 1900.⁴⁴ Almost uniquely, the clear air and uninterrupted view on the veldt permitted marksmen to see and shoot up to the maximum range of their rifles, which with the Mauser and its British equivalents, the .303 Lee-Metford and long Lee-Enfield, was well over 2,000 yards. At such ranges rifle fire was mostly unaimed, but these hits could still kill, and the baffling experience of being hit by an invisible enemy caused the British much trouble, and helped foster the impression of the Boers as superior marksmen.

Boer combat philosophy was shaped by the need to preserve a small population against rival African cattle-owning peoples who fought typically as massed charging infantry, such as the Zulu (still capable of massacring one Commando in a surprise attack at Holkans in May 1902). Already in the Transvaal War, some Boers had shown a remarkable grasp of how to attack when dismounted by combining fire and movement with cover, described as “shooting one another free” (“*Skiet mekaar los*”).⁴⁵ But the characteristic Boer tactic was to ride forward and then dismount to defend a position, in the earliest phase of the war leaving their horses with a wagon laager that might also include their families. Ground had little intrinsic value for them, and they were quite prepared to abandon their positions if the enemy closed to contact. This Boer withdrawal was a dangerous manoeuvre against a properly co-ordinated British attack, most evidently at Elandslaagte when a British cavalry charge caught the retreating Boer riders in the open and inflicted heavy casualties with their swords and lances. Haig, who interviewed Boer prisoners, was impressed both by the effectiveness of the charge and its psychological impact on the enemy.⁴⁶

The British had some experience both using the new magazine rifles and facing them, on the Afghan frontier in 1897 and in the Sudan in 1898. But their major tactical failing at the start of the war came from an infantry doctrine which left low-level commanders unsure of how to act when pinned under enemy fire. Some of the heaviest British losses, at Belmont on 23 November, Stormberg on 10 December, and Magersfontein on 11 December 1899, came from infantry attempting night marches to assault Boer positions, but mistiming their advance and being trapped under close-range fire at dawn. The British artillery’s doctrinal failing came from a great over-estimation of the new Lyddite

44. “List of Arms, Ammunition etc. Captured at Paardeberg, 27th February 1900,” WO 105/27, TNA; of 3,526 rifles captured, only 2,138 were modern: 1,930 Mausers and a further 208 Lee-Metfords.

45. George Duxbury, “The Battle of Majuba,” *Military History Journal (SA Military History Society)* 5 (December 1980): 81; I am grateful to Ken Gillings for both the reference and the translation.

46. Letter from Douglas Haig to his sister Henrietta, 26 October 1899, Haig Papers, NLS.

explosive when used for direct fire, seen also at Magersfontein and at Colenso on 15 December 1899. The cavalry's share of the British initial failure came chiefly from a severe lack of trained and acclimatised mounted troops to reconnoitre the battlefields properly beforehand, most evidently at Modder River on 28 November 1899. Wolseley's M.I. rapidly proved an inevitable failure, being insufficiently trained to ride properly, while the irregular mounted contingents raised in South Africa itself, including many loyal Boer volunteers from Cape Colony, varied greatly in quality.

The biggest single problem for the British Army in the Boer War soon became its lack of horses for the mounted arm, and any means of feeding them. Most of the Boers rode ponies fully acclimatised to cattle driving and hunting, two or three to a man, which survived on about 8 pounds of grain a day and a little grazing. Water was scarce except from muddy rivers and wells, while British horses disliked the thin grass of the veldt and could die within hours from South African "horse sickness," a lung disease for which there was no known cure.⁴⁷ British cavalry horses were also expected to carry up to 300 pounds all day over rough ground, and still to charge at the gallop when needed. This required a remarkable amount of food: the official ration was 10 pounds of oats, 12 pounds of hay, and 8 pounds of straw each day. If underfed the horses rapidly lost weight and condition, saddlery no longer fitted, and sore backs from rubbing crippled the horses. Most of the solution to this problem lay in "horsemastership," a mixture of country-wisdom and veterinary science which could keep horses fit and fed even in desert conditions, but which the predominantly urban recruits to the British cavalry simply did not possess. Unlike soldiers, horses could not be exercised on board ship and arrived at the war theatre unfit and unacclimatised, to be at once sent into action carrying crippling weights on short rations. As a result, in many British colonial wars in the second half of the nineteenth century, horses died in large numbers from starvation and mistreatment, usually disguised by the characteristically Victorian euphemism "horse exhaustion." Such conditions, culminating in a decision to reduce cavalry horse rations to just 8 pounds of grain a day, virtually wiped out the horses of the two British cavalry regiments employed in the course of the Zulu War, leading the War Office Veterinary Department to report that "in future wars in South Africa it will have to be borne in mind that, in order to maintain the health and efficiency of British horses, it is imperative that they be liberally fed on suitable food."⁴⁸ A similar lack of good

47. "Report on African Horse Sickness 27th October 1888," War Office Report 1/Cape/2, BL; Major General Frederick Smith, *A Veterinary History of the War in South Africa, 1899–1902* (London: privately printed, 1919).

48. "Zulu War 1879 Veterinary Department General Report," p. 4, WO 33/36 A 833, TNA; Smith, *A Veterinary History of the War in South Africa*, 1–14.

mounted troops was an important factor in the British defeat in the Transvaal War two years later.

This pattern of British horse losses was repeated on a massive scale during the Boer War. The horse population of South Africa was actually just large enough to have met all British demands for the three years of the war, but most of these horses were Boer ponies, untrained for British purposes and too small to carry the required weight. Sir Redvers Buller began his campaign in October 1899 with barely 14,500 horsemen of all types, an inferiority of about one to five compared to his enemies. Even so, Buller's supply problems proved so great that on 6 November 1899, over the protests of his veterinary officers, he ordered the standard horse ration cut to twelve pounds of oats a day, and reduced by a further third if grass were available for grazing. In practice this meant that, as in the Zulu War, horses received a maximum ration of eight pounds of grain a day, a fraction of their peacetime requirements.⁴⁹

Following the triple defeat of three British advancing columns at Magersfontein, Colenso, and Stormberg in "Black Week," Buller called for a great increase in mounted men for South Africa, specifying that they should be able to ride and shoot rather than charge mounted. Great Britain formed companies of volunteer Imperial Yeomanry (institutionally distinct from the home-service Yeomanry, although with some of the same personnel and officers), and the dominions contributed their own volunteer mounted rifle regiments. Lord Roberts was sent out to take over as Commander-in-Chief in South Africa, with Major General Lord Kitchener as his chief staff officer, leaving Buller in charge of the eastern theatre around Colenso. On his arrival on 10 January 1900, Roberts took a bold and calculated risk to end the war quickly: he ordered the raising of a much larger contingent of mounted men, including the requirement that every infantry battalion contribute an M.I. company, plus further mounted regiments of local volunteers. Most of these horsemen would reinforce Lord Methuen's advance to relieve the siege of Kimberley, with Roberts taking overall command, and then press on to the enemy capitals. Roberts and Kitchener were criticised at the time, and by historians since, for centralising the wagon transport for their forces moving up towards Kimberley, causing much temporary confusion.⁵⁰ But this has distracted attention from the more important issue: if Roberts's new mobile force could not win the war in a matter of weeks, there would be an inevitable supply catastrophe. It was the Mounted Infantry concept,

49. This paragraph is based heavily on Smith, *A Veterinary History of the War in South Africa*, passim, but all contemporary accounts reflect the severe problems the British experienced with horse supply.

50. See, for example, Leopold Amery, *My Political Life*, vol. 1, *England Before the Storm, 1896–1914* (London: Hutchinson, 1953), 126.

the belief that horsemen could be rapidly improvised, taken to its greatest ever extreme. Roberts and Kitchener did not solve the supply problems that had beset Methuen's initial advance so much as ignore them, simply accepting that they would take heavy losses in horses from starvation and in men from disease in the course of winning the campaign. Roberts had insufficient faith in the reformed cavalry movement to take the otherwise logical step of reducing his number of mounted troops, even in the face of Boer mounted superiority, in order to feed the horses of the cavalry regiments properly.

Roberts's way to Kimberley was led by an impressive flank march by the Cavalry Division, about 8,000 cavalry and M.I. under Major General Sir John French, which on 15 February 1900 managed a crucial mounted charge in loose order through a gap in a blocking position along a range of low hills held by perhaps 2,000 Boers at Klip Drift, and on to relieve the siege. According to the Cavalry Division war diary, the British losses in this charge were 4 men wounded and two horses killed; others put the number of British dead as high as 20 men.⁵¹ The point, certainly not lost on cavalrymen at the time, was that the loss bore no relation whatsoever to the theoretical firepower of 2,000 Mauser rifles. "For practical purposes," one theorist noted, "the Boer Mauser does not fire twice as many bullets in a minute as the Chassepôt" (the French single-shot breechloader of 1870), and therefore, "if the fire of 5,000 Chassepôts to the mile of front failed to stop the German cavalry" at Mars-la-Tour in 1870, "there is no reason to suppose that 500 Mausers to the mile would have any better result."⁵²

Immediately following the relief of Kimberley, French demonstrated the immense tactical flexibility of his reformed cavalry by pushing forward a brigade to cut off the main besieging force under General Piet Cronje, which had been camped at Magersfontein, and was now in full flight eastward with its wagons before Roberts's advancing infantry column. This cavalry brigade, with the dismounted firepower of less than an infantry battalion, overtook the 4,000 Boers at Paardeberg Drift on 17 February and opened fire dismounted from concealed positions. Believing themselves to be surrounded by the pursuing British main force, the Boers dug in, and after a short siege they surrendered on 27 February. Together with Kimberley this formed the first strategic British victory of the war, and a complete vindication of the cavalry's belief that their tactics could encompass both mounted and dismounted fighting.

51. Copy of the Cavalry Division War Diary, entry for 15 February 1900, Haig Papers, NLS.

52. F. N. Maude, *Cavalry: Its Past and Future* (London: William Clowes, 1903), 253.

This episode was also the end of French's Cavalry Division as a fighting force. The horses, already starving under Buller's regulations, received nothing to eat on the four days after the relief of Kimberley, five pounds of grain on the next day, one pound on the day after that, and no return to their totally inadequate normal ration of eight pounds until 23 February, by which date only 4,200 out of 8,000 horses were still alive.⁵³ As Roberts saw his chances of quick victory slip away, his relations with the cavalry became increasingly strained. Both French and Haig were astonished to hear him blame the weakened state of the horses solely on French, and on the poor horsemastership and training of their riders.⁵⁴

Roberts's gamble was finally lost at the Battle of Poplar Grove on 16 March 1900. This was a promising chance to end the war by pinning the main Boer army, together with the presidents of both republics and their leading commander, General Christiaan de Wet, in an enveloping trap against a river line, as at Paardeberg Drift. But delays resulted in the British attack because of Roberts's orders being given out in a confused fashion by his staff, and to de Wet's disgust, most of the Boers simply ran as the British shellfire began and the infantry advanced.⁵⁵ French's cavalry, unable to get their dying horses out of a trot, could not move quickly enough to complete the enclosure. Roberts's arrival in Bloemfontein shortly afterwards was a hollow victory, soured by mutual recriminations between himself and the cavalry.

After a lengthy pause to allow the field supply system at least a temporary reorganisation, and for the Army to recover from a cholera epidemic, the British began their advance towards Pretoria on 3 May 1900, only to find the pattern repeated of the Boers taking up defensive positions and then abandoning them as the battle started, notably at Zand River on 10 May, and again at Diamond Hill on 11 and 12 June. Each time, the British outflanked a Boer hill position only to see the Boers escape pursuit by their crippled mounted forces. Between 19 May and 9 June the strength of the cavalry brigades declined, despite replacements, by between 40 and 60 percent, virtually none of these losses being due to enemy action. But desertion diminished the Boer numbers, and stretching their lines to counter the British turning movements, they were often unable to concentrate enough firepower to stop a mounted

53. Carefully recorded by Douglas Haig both in his personal diary and the Cavalry Division War Diary, 15–23 February 1900, Haig Papers, NLS; see also C. S. Goldmann, *With General French and the Cavalry in South Africa* (London: Macmillan, 1903), 116.

54. Douglas Haig, personal diary entry for 24 February 1900, Haig Papers, NLS; see also the letter from Roberts to Lord Lansdowne, 22 February 1900, Roberts Papers, NAM.

55. Christiaan Rudolf de Wet, *Three Years' War* (London: Archibald Constable, 1902), 69; Holmes, *The Little Field Marshal*, 98–101.

charge, no matter how slowly or badly delivered. The British cavalry found that they could charge successfully against dismounted Boer riflemen entrenched on a hill crest, since after failing to shoot down the charge the Boers would run for their horses. French led the successful charge of one attenuated brigade at Zand River personally, an event which made a deep impression on him.⁵⁶ At Diamond Hill the eighty-five mounted men who were all that remained of the 12th Lancers drove away more than twice their own number of Boers in a frontal uphill charge, but then lost sixteen men and twice as many horses to flanking fire as they rallied back. Next, the composite Household Regiment, a mere seventy horsemen, made a similar charge but dismounted to hold the position that they had taken, for the loss of one wounded man and twenty-one wounded or collapsed horses. This was a revelation: cavalry taught to combine the mounted charge with dismounting could actually take and hold ground; it was, as Haig recognised, “a new factor in tactics,” a new arm totally unlike the cavalry of earlier centuries. (In fact, the U.S. Cavalry had developed something very similar near the end of the Civil War in 1865, but this had been forgotten.)⁵⁷

By June 1900, with the conventional phase of the war largely over, the British were sending horses to South Africa from as far away as Hungary, Argentina, India, and Australia straight off the ships and onto the veldt, where a vicious form of natural selection was in progress. The death rate among horses was actually higher than it might have been, since the British shot horses that might have recovered with proper treatment, rather than leaving them to suffer. Both the veterinary and remount services, geared to peacetime requirements, collapsed under the extra workload. The result, according to the painfully correct calculations of the Veterinary Department, was that of 487,497 horses used by the British Army in South Africa in the course of the war, 326,073, or approximately 67 percent, died.⁵⁸ The survivors were, understandably, the small hardy horses of the type used by the Boers themselves. Those riders who did not learn horsemanship rapidly faced at worst death, and at best a long walk carrying a saddle. By the fall of Pretoria even the M.I. were showing signs of improvement, although Major Michael Rim-

56. See the account of this charge in the Introduction by Sir John French to Friedrich von Bernhardi, *Cavalry in War and Peace*, trans. G. T. M. Bridges (London: Hugh Rees, 1910), no pagination.

57. Douglas Haig, *aide memoire* on cavalry written into the back of his personal diary for 1899, dated Pretoria, 3 July 1900, Haig Papers, NLS. Compare this and the British cavalry tactics and achievement in 1900 with those of the Federal cavalry in 1865 described in Stephen Z. Starr, *The Union Cavalry in the Civil War*, 3 vols. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979–85), 1:3–46.

58. Smith, *A Veterinary History of the War in South Africa*, 226.

ington, regarded as the best British Army horsemaster in South Africa, later claimed to the Elgin Commission to have been told by a mounted infantry trooper that he did not know whether to feed his horse on beef or mutton.⁵⁹

In March and April 1900 the first contingent of 10,000 Imperial Yeomanry (I.Y.) arrived from Britain, and at once began to experience the same problems that had beset the M.I. Even of the best of the I.Y. were regarded as quite useless for fighting until they had learned the ways of the veldt, the dominion volunteers in particular holding them in deep contempt. Senior officers felt that three weeks' acclimatisation was needed for men and horses, and veterinary officers recommended a minimum of nine weeks, but in practice both Roberts and Kitchener treated I.Y. regiments as operational after two weeks in South Africa, and expected from them marches of forty to fifty miles a day. It rapidly became proverbial that I.Y. on patrol were so likely to be surrounded and captured as to constitute little more than a free gift of arms and clothing to the enemy. In the later stages of the war Kitchener's staff took to hiding the existence of such regiments from him just to rest the horses.⁶⁰

By June 1900 the British mounted forces had reached a state of collapse from which they would take almost a year to recover. The active Boer forces, meanwhile, had shrunk to about 20,000 formidable "bitter enders" determined to continue the war, with no bases to defend and 430,000 square miles of veldt to hide in. In response the British reorganised themselves into "columns," or independent mounted brigades in all but name, containing any combination of cavalry, M.I., dominion or local volunteers, and I.Y. The infantry and artillery role changed to holding supply bases and strongpoints, and to manning blockhouses protecting the railway lines. In response to the Boer tactics of avoiding contact, the cavalry exchanged their carbines for longer-range infantry rifles, and the resulting skirmishing at up to 2,000 yards produced few casualties; it became almost normal for a mounted unit to serve its tour in South Africa with scarcely a death in battle. One I.Y. company spent eighteen months on the veldt including 65 enemy contacts for the loss of 3 men

59. *Report [and Minutes of Evidence and Appendices] of His Majesty's commissioners appointed to inquire into the military preparations and other matters connected with the war in South Africa*, Cd. 1789–90–91–92 (London: HMSO, 1903–8) [hereafter *Elgin Commission Report*]: Evidence, vol. 2, Cd. 1791, Evidence of Brigadier General M. F. Rimington, Q 12729, p. 31.

60. Letter from Ian Hamilton to Lord Roberts, 24 December 1901, Hamilton Papers, LHCMA; Douglas Haig, personal diary entry, 13 October 1988, Haig Papers, NLS; Smith, *A Veterinary History of the War in South Africa*, 14–16; Major General George Younghusband, *Forty Years a Soldier: A Volume of Recollections* (London: Putnam, 1923), 205; J. E. B. Seely, *Adventure!* (London: Heinemann, 1935), 56.

to hostile fire, and on average, from the first I.Y. contingent of 10,000, only 1 man in 50 died in action.⁶¹

Swords and lances were of no value to men whose horses could not gallop. Roberts suggested that to save weight the cavalry should abandon its weapons, but French protested, and the decision was left to individual column commanders. Some, notably Colonel Horace Smith-Dorrien, demanded that the cavalry give up their swords; other commanders at least turned a blind eye; and some regiments kept their swords for the duration of the war.⁶² This turned out to be the correct decision, since late in 1900 the Boers once more changed their tactics, and began to charge against isolated British columns. This Boer charge had three variants, all of them used successfully against the British.⁶³ The first was the dismounted charge using cover, used as early as the minor Boer victories of Nooitgedacht on 13 December and Helvetia on 29 December 1900. The second was a mounted charge dismounting within close rifle range and advancing on foot leading their horses, used particularly successfully at Bakenlaagte on 30 October 1901. The final version was a mounted charge in loose order, sometimes firing from the saddle, that was indistinguishable from an equivalent British cavalry charge.⁶⁴

The Boer willingness to charge may have been linked to the British decision to give up their swords: General Jan Smuts later told Douglas Haig that this was the biggest British mistake of the war, and from early 1901 even the M.I. were ordered to train with fixed bayonets on horseback as a substitute.⁶⁵ At Vlakfontein in May 1901, a Boer charge (chiefly on horseback, although some men dismounted), covered by a smoke-screen from burning grass, cost a British rearguard 186 casualties. At Blood River Poort in September, a British mounted column of 250 soldiers under Major Hubert Gough was tricked into dismounting in open order, the classic tactic of mounted riflemen, and then ridden over from a flank and surrounded, resulting in the capture of Gough and most of

61. Frank Fox, *The History of the Royal Gloucestershire Hussars Yeomanry, 1898–1923* (London: Philip Allen, 1923), 13; J. F. Edmeades, *Some Historical Records of the West Kent (Queen's Own) Yeomanry, 1794–1909* (London: Melrose, 1909), 114.

62. "Opinions as to the Arming of the Cavalry with the Long Rifle," WO/105/29, TNA; Lord Roberts to Ian Hamilton, 4 April 1902, Roberts Papers, NAM; Ian Hamilton to Lord Roberts, 30 April 1902, Hamilton Papers, LHCMA; Horace Smith-Dorrien, *Memories of Forty Eight Years' Service* (London: John Murray, 1925), 260.

63. Pretorius, *Life On Commando*, 144.

64. For the most detailed accounts of these Boer charges, see the evidence gathered by Erskine Childers in the Roberts Papers, NAM; and Childers, *War and the Arme Blanche*, 246–48.

65. *Elgin Commission Report: Evidence*, vol. 2, Cd. 1791, Evidence of Lieutenant Colonel D. Haig, Q 19471, p. 411; Colonel Henry Rawlinson's Column War Diary, Standing Order Number 4 dated 27 April 1901, Rawlinson Papers, NAM.

his force. But these mounted charges always carried with them a high risk. At Rooiwall on 11 April 1902, a Boer force of almost 1,000 horsemen failed to surprise a British column and found itself charging into the fire of 1,500 rapidly dismounted riflemen. Even so, the Boers were turned back only seventy yards from the British, for the total loss of 51 killed, 40 wounded, and 36 prisoners, which again bore no relation to the theoretical firepower that they had faced. The most famous successful Boer charge was made by a Commando under General J. H. “Koos” de la Rey at Tweebosch on 7 March 1902, which captured Lord Methuen. The contrast is revealing between Methuen’s perhaps over-gallant compliment to de la Rey, “That was a magnificent charge. If those are going to be your tactics in future, you still have a chance to win the war!” and his evidence to the Elgin Commission a few months later that the cavalry and the mounted charge were both obsolete.⁶⁶ But while the Boer Commandos were adopting the charging tactics of the cavalry, by late 1901 the British columns had turned themselves into mounted riflemen in all but name, almost identical to their Boer opponents in horsemastership, in weapons, and often in general appearance (also, by the war’s end there were probably more loyal Boers serving with the British columns than against them, together with many African mounted riflemen). As the quality of the British mounted forces improved, a number of small mounted combats occurred, and most Boers regained a healthy fear of being caught by a British mounted charge.

Among the troops that formed the British mounted columns at the Boer War’s end were the battalions created by Roberts in early 1900 and still known as “Mounted Infantry,” although after two years’ fighting they bore little resemblance to the under-trained, improvised force envisaged by Wolseley in the 1880s. In the war’s aftermath the M.I. commanders, including one of Roberts’s own protégés, Colonel Henry Rawlinson commanding the 8th M.I., begged Roberts to keep their troops as a permanent part of the Army. The Treasury, as usual, had the last word: at the war’s end the men were returned to their infantry battalions, and in 1905 the M.I. reverted to its prewar status as an entirely improvised force. Just before the First World War a small increase in the number of cavalry, for which Wolseley had argued in vain thirty years before, removed the justification for the M.I.’s existence, and in 1913 the force and its training schools were disbanded.⁶⁷

66. Miller, *Lord Methuen and the British Army*, 229, 241–42.

67. Army Council Decisions 1913, Précis Number 734 “Reorganisation of the Cavalry of the Expeditionary Force,” pp. 446–48, WO 163/18, TNA; “The Passing of the Old M.I.,” *Cavalry Journal* 9, no. 34 (April 1914): 209–13; Henry Rawlinson to Lord Roberts, 26 November 1901, 15 December 1901, and 27 March 1902, Roberts Papers, NAM.

"No one can have a greater belief in Cavalry than I do," wrote Lord Roberts as Commander-in-Chief in 1901. "It will, I am satisfied, be more required than ever in wartime." This view was reflected in the Elgin Commission's conclusion that, "in view of the great extension of the field of operations in modern warfare, an Army should contain a much larger proportion of mounted men than formerly." Erskine Childers's view, expressed in *War and the Arme Blanche* in 1910, was that "mounted men not only can pass through a fire-zone unscathed, but making genuine and destructive attacks against riflemen and guns," although he insisted that swords were unnecessary for the success of such a charge. Leopold Amery also acknowledged that by the war's end, "our cavalry leaders used to gallop at any position with mounted troops in loosely extended order, and almost invariably with success." These views were very close to Haig's evidence to the Elgin Commission that "the ideal cavalry is one which can attack on foot, and fight on horseback." The real point at issue after the Boer War was how best to train and employ this exciting and versatile new arm, and whether it should be institutionally based in the old cavalry regiments or in an offshoot of the infantry, an alternative that never appeared as practical or financially realistic.⁶⁸

In February 1900, following "Black Week," the British government had needed a quick victory in South Africa from Lord Roberts. A formidably politically experienced commander, Roberts went to great lengths by a mixture of rewards and controls both to ensure that British reporting of the war was solidly in his favour, and later to influence the content of both the *Times History* of the war and the multivolume *Official History* so as to reflect his own views.⁶⁹ From his appointment as Commander-in-Chief in 1901 until his death from old age and pneumonia in 1914, Roberts stood for British Army reform in the wider sense, and soldiers and politicians who supported him as reformers, including Churchill and Amery, were effectively compelled to support also his reputation as a great soldier, and as a by-product of this his view of the cav-

68. Lord Roberts to General Sir Evelyn Wood, 29 September 1901, Roberts Papers, NAM; *Elgin Commission Report: Report*, Cd. 1791, p. 49; Childers, *War and the Arme Blanche*, 105; *Elgin Commission Report: Evidence*, vol. 2, Cd. 1791, Evidence of Mr L. S. Amery, Q 20524, p. 470; *Elgin Commission Report: Evidence*, vol. 2, Cd. 1791, Evidence of Lieutenant Colonel D. Haig, "Prepared Précis of Evidence," p. 403.

69. Simon J. Potter, "The British Press and News Gathering Strategies," and Ian F. W. Beckett, "British Official History," both in *Recording the South African War: Journalism and Official History, 1899–1914*, ed. Craig Wilcox (London: Sir Robert Menzies Centre for Australian Studies, 1999), 17–28 and 33–42; Stephen Badsey, "War Correspondents in the Boer War," in *The Boer War: Direction, Experience and Image*, ed. John Gooch (London: Frank Cass, 2000), 187–202.

alry's performance under his command in South Africa. But for historians who can see past the contemporary denigration heaped on the British cavalry from these institutional and personal motives, its performance in the Boer War can hardly be described as a failure. It is not going too far to suggest that, in wider accounts of mobile warfare doctrine, the British cavalry reformers of the later nineteenth century are entitled to greater recognition than they have received. Also, any evaluation of the British commanders of the First World War and their doctrine of the offensive must take into account their success in devising an appropriate offensive doctrine for mounted troops in the 1890s, and applying it against considerable difficulties in the Boer War.